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ABSTRACT

Peak performance in the death crisis as a critical incident of creative response to the awareness of one's own or another person's death is the concern of this report. The topology of peak performance in the death crisis was examined in an investigation of retrospective self-reports of 20 adult respondents and a factor structure of peak performance provided by 120 respondents in psychology, creative arts, adult education, and counselor education. Further examination of data contributed by respondents who reported peak performance in death crises indicated that value, loss of time and space, spontaneity, and meaning were among experiential factors considered important in personal events. The resulting topology provides a tentative model for death counseling and education, offering a positive alternative to interventions based on a perspective of pathology. (Author/JAC)

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Factors of Peak Performance in the Death Crisis: Implications for Death Counseling and Education

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Factors of Peak Performance in the Death Crisis: Implications for Death Counseling and Education

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During the 1970s, death education and counseling became recognized as concerns of hospitals, mental health and social service clinics, and schools as well as the family guided by its church. The need for professional intervention has expanded, of course, because dying has become increasingly separated from life experiences, with dispersion of the family, segregation by age, and hospital isolation of dying people. In part, professional involvement emerged from increased understanding of dying and bereavement as psycho-social phenomena (Kubler-Ross, 1969) and of death education and counseling as developmentally sound and needed services (Leviton & Forman, 1974). In addition, the development of research instruments (Hardt, 1974) makes it feasible to study the effects of intervention on attitudes about death (Mansfield, Privette, & Bilbrey, 1982).

The present report is concerned with peak performance in the death crisis as a critical incident of a creative response to the awareness of one's own or another person's death. Peak performance, defined as superior functioning in any activity, is targeted in this report toward events centered on the imminent possibility of death and includes descriptions by such respondents as the following:

a law-enforcement officer at the scene of a double-fatality traffic accident,

a young hunter who dropped into a mountain cave that contained a rattlesnake den,

a mother of a dying child who, herself, suffered grand-mal seizures while tending her son,

a professional woman responding to the mysterious crisis of her neighbor,

a cancer patient after surgery.

These and other episodes of peak performance in the death crisis are critical incidents which provide a model for the goals of death counseling and education, clarifying possibilities.

A recent paper prepared for the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Forum for Death Education and Counseling (Privette, 1981b; Privette, 1982a) discussed key factors of peak performance in the death crisis as described by these and other similar research respondents. The present report is supplemental to the earlier paper and has been prepared to make available certain data and analyses that are needed for discriminating interpretations of the previous paper. This analysis describes only one type of peak performance; therefore, reports of the generic construct, "peak performance," may be useful references for researchers or practitioners who are concerned with peak performance in the death crisis (Privette, 1981a; Privette, 1982b)

Method

Subjects

The generic study involved 120 respondents composed of 30 members in each of four groups: psychology, creative arts, adult education, and counselor

education. The 45 men and 75 women ranged in age from 16 to 65. All respondents provided peak performance and average behavior data, providing their own control. Narratives written by the respondents were evaluated at a 78% rate of agreement by trained raters for relevance, clarity, and credibility. Only data fulfilling the criteria were retained for analysis. In addition, trained raters were given the following definition to identify narratives describing peak performance in the death crisis:

> death crisis: activity involving the real or perceived possibility of one's own or another person's death.

The raters identified 20 respondents, 10 male and 10 female, as reporting peak performance in the death crisis.

Instrument

The questionnaire (Privette & Landsman, in press), developed from theoretical literature and qualitative data, asked for a narrative description of a personal peak performance and also a parallel activity comprising average functioning. Each of these open questions was followed by a 74-item, Likert-type scale. By this means, the questionnaire was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data for both levels of functioning, peak and average. All items included in the questionnaire are shown in abbreviated form in Table 1.

Analysis of Data

Data from 120 respondents were used for factor analysis (Varimax rotation) to develop a tentative topology of peak performance. Because the main objective was the reduction of variables without losing significant content, a maximum number of factors was rotated, retaining all with a latent root (Eigen value) of 1.0 or greater. For the present topology, difference scores (peak minus average) were obtained for each of the 74 items and used in the factor analysis and computation of factor scores. This procedure was adopted to minimize inter-item discrepancies, such as social desirability or semantic inequities. The resulting difference scores are indices of discrimination, showing the relative strength of variables to differentiate peak from average levels of functioning.

From the factor structure and scoring coefficient matrix based on difference scores, factor scores were computed for the 20 respondents who were identified as reporting events of peak performance in the death crisis. Duncan's multiple range test compared these scores with those of 5 other types of peak performance: aesthetic, sports, intellectual, personal-interpersonal, and miscellaneous.

Two additional subsets of items identified by trained raters are included in the topology. From the 74-item scale, the raters identified 13 items that expressed a strong sense of self and 9 items related to other people. Scores on each of these subsets were compared with their counterparts (self versus nonself and other people versus not others) by *t* tests. Using Duncan's test, peak performance in the death crisis was compared with 5 other types of activities on both variables, self and other people.

Results

Based on the analyses of difference scores, a tentative topology of peak performance was developed. This topology is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Topology of Peak Performance in the Death Crisis

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
1.	Important Value	2.0	1.6
	involved important beliefs, values	76	1.6
2.	Loss of Time and Space	2.0	1.5
	lost sense of time	77	1.4
	ordinary sense of things faded	51	1.7
3.	Unrestrained Spontaneity (Flow)	2.9	1.3
	action just came out of me	78	1.3
	all of me working together	65	1.55
	objects, thoughts cperated selves	45	1.15
	experience its own reward	45	.65
4.	Emergency	2.7	1.2
	beginning was fearful	82	.85
	happened in crisis situation	70	1.55
5.	Religiosity: Meaningfulness	2.6	1.1
	sense of divinity, God	69	.9
	more real than usual reality	55	1.25
	strength came from unusual source	45	1.8
	event seemed a mission	43	.9

Table 1 continued

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
6.	Click: Functional Autonomy	2.1	1.1
	started in a flash	77	1.4
	things went right without effort	44	.5
7.	Interpersonal Response	2.3	1.0
	another asked something of me	81	.7
	action in response to someone else	66	.9
	trusted/trusting person involved	61	1.35
8.	Seriousness	1.8	.9
	action new instead of repeating old	40	1.75
	feeling of playfulness	-83	-.8
9.	Ineffable High: Peak Experience	2.1	.8
	words not enough	78	1.2
	feelings were alive	59	.5
	left with awe	47	.3
10.	Depletion	2.1	.8
	experience left me exhausted	77	1.1
	felt I was responsible	50	.25
	experience left me tense	35	.9
11.	Consistency	1.8	.8
	acts consistent with inner state	80	.75
	left with peace, serenity	39	.7

Table 1 continued

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
	Item Subset: Sense of Self		.7
	seemed to rise above outside limits		1.55
	all of me working together		1.55
	complete involvement of whole being		1.2
	full of force		1.15
	certain of rising above usual level		.9
	acts consistent with inner state		.75
	completeness, wholeness		.55
	learned something about myself		.45
	nothing could destroy me		.3
	felt I could do anything		.3
	expression of self		.3
	felt I was responsible		.25
	deep down I had known I could		-.6
12.	Clarity of Role (by others)	2.0	.6
	clear what needed to be done	73	1.5
	no one else able or willing	66	.6
	beginning, others negative	-46	.25
13.	Power and Joy	5.2	.6
	left with fulfillment	70	.75
	certain of rising above usual level	66	.9
	felt all-powerful joy	66	.6

Table 1 continued

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
	completeness, wholeness	62	.55
	left clean, new	51	.45
	outside and above myself	49	.95
	full of force	46	1.15
	strength came from unusual source	45	1.8
	certain I was right	42	.8
	nothing could destroy me	42	.3
	in the beginning I doubted success	-55	.4
14.	Personal Understanding, Communication	2.4	.6
	liked people in general way	75	.3
	understood something important	61	.95
	learned something about myself	42	.45
	genuine communication with another	40	1.05
	expression of self	40	.3
15.	Clearly Focused Self: Intensity	4.1	.6
	normal desires faded	91	-.15
	normal cares faded	84	.2
	overwhelmed other senses, thoughts	61	1.1
	complete involvement of whole being	55	1.2
	detached from world, usual reality	47	1.1
	Item Subset: Other People		.5
	trusted/trusting person involved		1.35

Table 1 continued

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
	genuine communication with another		1.05
	action in response to someone else		.9
	another asked something of me		.7
	others were paying attention		.55
	liked people in general way		.3
	desire to better others		.15
	others gave sense of well-being		.15
	determined to win approval		-.3
16.	Intention	3.8	.5
	determined to do better than usual	86	1.55
	determined to put out effort	83	.5
	determined to win approval	67	-.3
	strong motivation	48	1.5
	wanted to accomplish something different	45	-.15
	desire to better others	43	.15
17.	Awareness of Others	2.3	.4
	others were paying attention	84	.55
	others gave sense of well-being	69	.15
18.	Transcending Outer Limits	1.7	.3
	seemed to rise above outside limits	61	1.55
	beginning, danger	-72	.3

Table 1 continued

	Factor / Item	% Variance / Loading	Factor Mean / Item Mean
19.	Global Awareness	1.9	.2
	greater awareness of surroundings	77	.5
	at home in the world	43	-.4
	interested in activity before	-51	-.4
20.	Extraneous Vivid	1.9	-.05
	something unimportant was vivid	81	-.05
21.	Feeling of Omnipotence	1.5	-.1
	felt I could do anything	67	.3
	environment was different	60	.45
22.	Impulsion toward Closure	2.1	-.1
	must continue until finished	75	.8
	deep down I had known I could	55	-.6
	had to think for myself	-39	.95
23.	Pleasant, Easy Beginning	2.5	-.6
	beginning influenced by beauty	78	-.65
	fascinated by act	47	.05
	after related thinking or physical activity	43	.2
	situation called out, demanded	-54	1.35

The relative value of factors for various types of peak performance may be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Factor Scores of Peak Performance by Types

Factor	MS	F	Total	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Unrestrained Spontaneity	1.3	.15	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.8*	.8*	1.1	1.4
2. Ineffable High: Peak Experience	1.9	.71	1.1	.8	1.4	1.1	1.0	1.4	1.0
3. Religiosity: Meaningfulness	1.2	.56	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.3	1.0	1.5	.8
4. Loss of Time and Space	2.2	.80	1.1	1.5	.9	1.1	.3	.2	-.0
5. Power and Joy	1.1	.11	1.1	.6*	1.2	1.4*	.7	1.3	1.2
6. Click: Functional Autonomy	2.1	.90	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.0	.8	.7	1.2
x. Sense of Self	.7	.16	1.0	.7*	1.0	1.3*	.8	1.2	1.0
7. Emergency	1.9	.46	1.0	1.2	1.2	.5	.8	1.3	.8
8. Intention	1.6	.57	.8	.5	.7	.9	1.1	.6	1.0
9. Clearly Focused Self: Intensity	1.7	.08	.8	.6	.8	1.3*	.9	1.0	.1*
10. Important Value	3.1	.13	.8	1.6*	.4*	.8	.1*	1.2	.7
11. Transcending Outer Limits	1.5	.41	.6	.3	.9	.7	.3	1.0	.5
12. Interpersonal Response	1.8	.35	.5	1.0	.3	.8	.4	.7	.2
13. Awareness of Others	2.2	.81	.5	.4	.4	.3	.7	.7	.8
14. Consistency	2.0	.33	.5	.8	.6	.6	.3	.9	-.1
15. Depletion	1.5	.24	.5	.8	.2	.2	.3	.6	.8

Table 2 continued

	Factor	MS	F	Total	1	2	3	4	5	6
16.	Seriousness	1.3	.22	.4	.9	.3	.8	.2	.3	.2
17.	Personal Understanding, Communication	1.3	.44	.4	.6	.2	.8	.5	.6	.2
x	Other People	.6	.72	.4	.5	.2	.4	.5	.4	.3
18.	Impulsion toward Closure	1.3	.36	.3	-.1	.3	.5	.2	.2	.7
19.	Clarity of Role	1.0	.11	.3	.6*	.2	-.2*	.1	.6*	.4
20.	Global Awareness	1.2	.01	.2	.2	.0	.2	.3	1.2*	-.4
21.	Feeling of Omnipotence	1.4	.56	.1	-.1	.2	.1	.5	-.2	-.1
22.	Pleasant, Easy Beginning	1.3	.16	.0	-.6*	.2	.1	.3*	.2	-.0
23.	Extraneous Vivid	1.9	.63	-.0	-.1	.2	.0	.2	-.4	-.3

df = 114, n = 120

*significant difference, Alpha Level = .05

Groups: 1 = Death Crisis (n = 20)
2 = Aesthetic (n = 28)
3 = Intellectual (n = 21)
4 = Miscellaneous (n = 17)
5 = Personal-Interpersonal (n = 14)
6 = Sports (n = 20)

Analysis of variance and Duncan's multiple range test of each factor indicate the following variations among types:

(1) Important Value, $p. < .2$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis (higher) and aesthetic and miscellaneous is significant (Duncan's);

(2) Clarity of Role (by Others), $p. < .2$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis (higher) and intellectual is significant (Duncan's);

(3) Power and Joy, $p. < .2$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis (lower) and intellectual is significant (Duncan's);

(4) Pleasant, Easy Beginning, $p. < .3$ (ANOVA), difference between death (lower) and miscellaneous is significant (Duncan's);

(5) Global Awareness, $p. < .01$ (ANOVA), personal/interpersonal is significantly higher than all other types (Duncan's);

(6) Clearly Focused Self: Intensity, $p. < .1$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis and all other types is not significant (Duncan's);

(7) Unrestrained Spontaneity (Flow), $p. < .2$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis and all other types is not significant (Duncan's);

(8) Sense of Self, $p. < .2$ (ANOVA), difference between death crisis (lower) and intellectual is significant. (Duncan's).

Implications for Death Counseling and Education

This technical report is intended to supplement with supporting data the discussion of peak performance in the death crisis at the Forum for Death Education and Counseling (Privette, 1981b; Privette, 1982a). It may be seen in this topology that something outside--a value symbolized, a crisis with great meaning and seriousness--is of utmost importance and clearly in focus, overwhelming other senses and thoughts. With power and force one responds, and

the response is also clear and, therefore, effective and creative. The person's role in the situation is clear, but the sense of self is less prominent in the death crisis than in some other types of peak performance. Death confrontation, when it leads to peak performance is a critical incident of creative response to the awareness of death and, as such, is a model for death counseling and education. This model serves in much the way that self actualization serves humanistic counseling and education, not as a Procrustean mold, but as a positive alternative to "neurotic" and other negative responses to death, i.e., avoidance, prolonged grief and passivity, and displaced anger. Factors found in peak performance in the death crisis help clarify the possibilities inherent in death counseling and education and, to some extent, differentiate intervention in the death confrontation from other types of intervention.

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